

Marshall Space Flight Center  
Users Guide to the  
NASA Employee Performance  
Communication System (EPCS)

MSFC Human Resources Department  
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## **Overview**

### **O.1. Purpose**

World-class organizations use performance measurement systems to determine whether they are fulfilling their vision and meeting their customer-focused strategic goals. They know where they are and where they are going by measuring performance against organizational goals and objectives. Leading-edge organizations use performance measurement to gain insight into, and make judgments about the effectiveness and efficiency of their programs, their processes and their people. The purpose of this Guide is to provide MSFC employees and supervisors with detailed guidance on the implementation and operation of the Agency's performance measurement system, the NASA Employee Performance Communication System (EPCS). In cases where there is specific conflict with or modification to this guidance by a collective bargaining agreement the agreement shall take precedence.

### **O.2. Coverage**

All MSFC employees are covered by EPCS except: (1) SES employees; (2) employees excluded by 5 U.S.C. 4301(2) and (3) Excepted Service employees excluded by 5 CFR § 430.202(c) and (d).

### **O.3. Authority**

- O.3.1. Title 5, United States Code, Part III, Subpart C, Chapter 43 is the statutory authority for performance measurement systems within the Federal Government.
- O.3.2. Title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 430, Subpart B implements 5 USC Chapter 43 and establishes Government-wide policies and parameters for Agency performance measurement systems.
- O.3.3. NPG 3430.1A, NASA Employee Performance Communication System (EPCS) describes specific procedures, methods and requirements for planning, monitoring, and assessing employee performance.

#### **O.4. System Characteristics**

- O.4.1. The NASA Employee Performance Communication System appraises employee performance on elements at two levels: (1) "Meets Expectations" and (2) "Fails to Meet Expectations."
- O.4.2. The NASA Employee Performance Communication System appraises employee performance at two summary levels. These are (1) "Meets Expectations" and; (2)" Fails to Meet Expectations." Two-level systems are sometimes referred to as pass/fail systems.
- O.4.3. In a pass/fail appraisal system all performance elements are "critical elements". A critical element is an assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance in that element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance would be rated "Fails to Meet Expectations."
- O.4.4. The EPCS permits the use of both specific elements and standards that are developed by a supervisor for the specific requirements of a position and generic elements and standards that apply to all MSFC positions.

#### **O.5 Responsibilities**

- O.5.1. Supervisors are responsible for:
- Assuring that position descriptions accurately reflect the duties and responsibilities assigned to their employees.
  - Determining and documenting in writing the required performance plans of positions under their supervision, and update those plans as needed.
  - Informing subordinate employees at the beginning of the performance appraisal period, and to the degree practicable and as needed throughout the year, of the acceptable level of performance for the assigned positions.
  - Conducting at least 1 progress review for subordinate employees during the appraisal period.
  - Appraising and rating each employee's performance at required times.
  - Recognizing and nominating employees for awards when performance so warrants.

- Providing guidance and assistance to employees with performance that falls below the “Meets Expectations” level.
- Initiating appropriate corrective action including developing Performance Improvement Plans (with the assistance of the Human Resources Department) when an employee fails to improve unacceptable performance.

#### O.5.2. Employees are responsible for:

- Participating with their supervisors in developing performance plans for their positions.
- Requesting that supervisors clarify any performance elements or standards not clearly understood.
- Advising supervisors of circumstances that may impact upon or deter the employee from properly performing duties or meeting assigned deadlines.
- Participating in progress reviews and appraisal discussions with their supervisors.
- Performing assigned work.

#### O.5.3. Reviewing Officials are responsible for reviewing, revising as necessary, and approving summary ratings in situations where the immediate supervisor has assigned a summary rating of “Fails to Meet Expectations.”

### **O.6. Key Components**

There are 5 key components to any effective performance measuring system:

- **PLANNING** –Setting goals and measures and establishing and communicating performance elements and standards.
- **MONITORING** – Measuring performance, providing feedback and conducting progress reviews.
- **DEVELOPING** – Addressing poor performance and improving good performance.
- **RATING** – Summarizing performance and assigning a rating of record.
- **REWARDING** – Recognizing and rewarding good performance.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management has published a comprehensive handbook for supervisors and employees that describes each of these key elements in depth. A Handbook for Measuring Employee Performance, Aligning Employee Performance Plans with Organizational Goals is available online at: <http://www.opm.gov>

## **Aligning Employee Performance with Organizational Goals**

### **1.1. Alignment with strategic direction**

- 6.1.2. Performance measurement systems succeed when the organization's strategic and business performance measures are in alignment with overall organizational goals. Benchmarking studies have shown that successful organizations create linkages between their performance measurement system and their strategic plans and goals.
- 6.1.3. Every organization needs a clear and cohesive performance measurement framework that is understood by all levels of the organization and that supports organizational objectives. Effective leaders convey the organization's vision, mission, and strategic direction to employees and customers clearly, concisely and repeatedly. Organizational goals and objectives are communicated in a variety of ways. This information sets the stage for the development of useful performance measures, since the more clearly goals are communicated, the easier it is for employees to see and decide on what needs to be accomplished.
- 6.1.4. The NASA Employee Performance Communication System is designed to support the NASA mission, goals and strategic plan. Every employee's performance plan must contain at least one element that addresses the individual's performance and it's relationship to the NASA strategic plan. The strategic linkage may be made through the MSFC Implementation Plan or it may be tied directly to the NASA Strategic Plan.

## Performance Planning

### 2.1. Setting Goals

- 2.1.1 Supervisors need to communicate organizational goals and how they link to individual performance in order to accomplish desired results. While developing performance plans supervisors and employees should talk about how employee accomplishments can support organizational goals. By aligning employee performance with organizational goals supervisors are able to direct their employees' efforts toward maximizing accomplishments and supporting NASA's Strategic Plan.
- 2.1.2. Performance elements and standards should be measurable, understandable, verifiable, equitable and achievable. Employee performance plans should also be flexible so that they can be adjusted for changing program objectives and work requirements.
- 2.1.3. The rating official must establish a written performance plan for each employee. Normally, these plans will be established within 30 days of the beginning of the appraisal cycle. Performance plans must be in writing and given to employees before an appraisal can be based on those standards.
- 2.1.4. The supervisor will encourage employee participation in establishing performance plans. Employee participation can take place in a number of ways including, but not limited to: (1) employees and supervisors developing the plans together; (2) the employee providing the supervisor a draft plan; (3) the employee commenting on a draft plan provided by the supervisor; or (4) the supervisor obtaining information from a sample of employees who perform similar jobs.

### 2.2. Establishing Performance Elements

- 6.1.2. Under NASA's two-level performance measuring system all performance elements are critical elements. Critical elements are the cornerstone of individual accountability in employee performance management. Failure on one or more critical elements can result in an employee's reassignment, removal, or reduction in grade.
- 2.2.2. OPM recommends that performance elements be written in the form of **accomplishments** focusing on outputs such as a product or service that lead to organizational goal achievement rather than descriptions of **activities**. Measuring and recognizing accomplishments, rather than activities lead to improved performance.



## 6.2. Establishing Performance Standards

2.3.1. Performance standards are management-approved expressions of the performance threshold requirement or expectation that employees must meet in order to be appraised at a “meets expectations” level of performance. Each element must have a “meets expectations” standard established.

2.3.2. The Merit Systems Protection Board and the Courts have issued many decisions on what constitutes a valid performance standard. The Board has established two key tests that a performance standard must pass in order to be considered valid: First, except in certain rare cases, (such as a risk of death or injury) a standard may not be absolute, (i.e., It must allow for some error.). Second, the standard must inform the employee of the level of performance needed to retain his or her job, (i.e., to perform at the “Meets Expectations” level).

The following are examples of what *not to do* in writing “Meets Expectations” standards. The Board would consider the standards in the examples below to be *invalid*:

### Example 1:

Element: Completed projects

Standard: Work is timely, efficient, and of acceptable quality.

### Example 2:

Element: Provides solutions to customer problems.

Standard: Proposed solutions are feasible and cost effective.

MSPB considers these standards to be absolute (and therefore invalid) because they appear to require that work is *a/ways* timely and efficient and of acceptable quality and that the employee must *a/ways* propose solutions that are feasible and cost effective.

By adding either general or specific measures standards can be created that are not considered absolute and are therefore considered valid by MSPB. The following are examples of specific measures that would be considered valid:

Example 1:

Element: Audits are completed

Standard: No more than 5 errors per month are found in audits.

Example 2:

Element: Personnel actions are processed.

Standard: No more than 3 actions per month are processed in more than 10 days.

The following are examples of general measures that would be considered valid standards:

Example 1:

Element: Construction projects are completed.

Standard: The supervisor is routinely satisfied that the project is constructed according to the design.

Example 2:

Element: Budget status is continuously tracked and updated.

Standard: The engineer is routinely able to answer questions about the project's financial status at any time.

2.3.3. When writing standards, avoid simply listing tasks. The following are examples of tasks rather than performance standards:

- Reviews invoices for accuracy
- Files documents
- Answers customer questions

These task descriptions would not be considered valid performance standards because they do not inform the employee of the level of performance required to retain his/her job.

## **Performance Monitoring**

### **3.1. Measuring Performance**

- 6.1.2. In an effective organization assignments and projects are monitored continually. Monitoring well means consistently measuring performance and providing ongoing feedback to employees on their progress toward reaching their goals.
- 6.1.3. Progress reviews provide the link between performance planning and performances assessment activities. Progress reviews serve as an excellent opportunity to do the following:
- Review progress to date toward planned level of achievement.
  - Identify and resolve problems that constitute obstacles to performance that are beyond the control of the employee.
  - Adjust priorities to accommodate the impact of new requirements, schedule changes, project cancellations, etc.
  - Establish new objectives for the appraisal period that were not known or definable at the time of the performance planning session or delete objectives that are no longer appropriate in light of current conditions.
  - Provide interim feedback on performance and examine ways to improve the existing level of performance on assigned objectives.
- 6.1.4. The NASA Employee Performance Communication System requires that at a minimum one progress review be held during the appraisal period, generally near the mid-point. However, in situations where performance deficiencies have been identified, more frequent reviews are recommended. Documenting those reviews is not required, however it may prove useful if performance does not improve and a performance-based action (reassignment, removal or demotion) has to be initiated.
- 6.1.5. When there are significant changes in work assignments, resources available, or major shifts in function or priorities that impact an employee's existing performance elements or standards, modifications should be recorded on the MSFC Form 4282. New elements and standards become effective at the time the revisions are recorded. The role of the employee in this modification

procedure parallels his/her role when the plan was originally established.

## **Employee Development**

### **4.1. Increasing the Capacity to Perform**

In an effective organization, employee developmental needs are evaluated and addressed. Developing, in this instance means increasing the capacity to perform through training, providing assignments that introduce new skills or higher levels of responsibility, improving work processes or other methods.

### **4.2. Competencies**

Competencies are sets of measurable skills, knowledge, behaviors, and personal attributes critical to successful performance. Employees must have the right competencies in order to complete a job satisfactorily. Organizational leaders must pay close attention to this factor in the performance management process. They must carefully determine which competencies are important to achieving results set out in strategic performance plans so that they can make effective work assignments and establish individual development plans for employees that focus on the most important competencies.

Carrying out the process of performance management provides an excellent opportunity for supervisors and employees to identify developmental needs.

## **Performance Assessment**

### **5.1. Rating Employee Performance**

5.1.1. Rating means evaluating employee performance against the elements and standards in an employee's performance plan and assigning a summary rating of record. A written rating of record must be given to each employee as soon as practicable (generally within 30 days) after the end of the appraisal period. The supervisor should review work products, accomplishments, and work status reports which reflect the employee's performance and overall achievements with respect to the elements and performance standards established at the beginning of the appraisal period including applicable summary ratings from details, previous positions, or temporary promotions during the rating period. The supervisor may request information from the employee to assist in the review. The supervisor may also consult with other sources including customers, peers, team members, and team leaders in evaluating individual performance.

5.1.2 A rating of record will be prepared only if the employee has served under a performance plan for at least 90 days during the appraisal period. When a rating of record cannot be prepared at the end of the appraisal period, the appraisal period (for that individual) will be extended for the amount of time necessary to meet the minimum amount of time necessary to meet the minimum period at which time a rating of record will be prepared.

6.1.2. Each employee must be appraised on each element in the performance plan on which the employee has had an opportunity to perform. An element shall be left unrated only if the employee has had insufficient opportunity to demonstrate performance in this area. Simply note on the form: "No opportunity to perform". Such a notation should not be considered derogatory information. Employees should not be given a "Meets" rating on any element for which they had no chance to perform.

6.1.3. Any element rated "Fails to Meet Expectations" will result in an overall rating of "Fails to Meet Expectations". All "Fails to Meet Expectations" ratings must be reviewed by the supervisor at the next higher organizational level.

6.1.4. The rater will discuss the assessment and rating in detail with the employee and provide him/her with a copy of the completed appraisal form. This discussion should serve to: (1) analyze what transpired during the appraisal period; (2) identify where future improvements can be made; and (3) place the employee's performance in proper perspective so that appropriate follow up actions can be taken by both parties.

## **Recognizing and Rewarding Good Performance**

### **6.1. Rewarding**

- 6.1.1. Benchmarking studies have shown that highly effective organizations link pay or rewards to their performance measurement systems. Rewarding means recognizing employees individually and as members of groups for their performance and acknowledging their contributions to the Agency's mission.
- 6.1.2. An employee who receives a rating of "Meets Expectations" is eligible to be considered for monetary and non-monetary recognition. A Quality step increase may be granted to an employee who demonstrates sustained high quality performance above that required for the "Meets Expectations" level.

## **Appendix A**

### **A.1. Compliance with the Technology Transfer Act of 1986**

A.1.1. The Technology Transfer Act of 1986, (Public Law 99-502) establishes Government policy concerning the transfer of federally owned or originated technology to State and local governments and to the private sector. The Act states:

“(a) Policy

- (1) It is the continuing responsibility of the Federal Government to ensure the full use of the results of the Nation’s Federal investment in research and development. To this end the Federal Government shall strive where appropriate to transfer federally owned or originated technology to State and local governments and to the private sector.
- (2) Technology transfer consistent with mission responsibilities, is a responsibility of each laboratory science and engineering professional.
- (3) Each laboratory director shall ensure that efforts to transfer technology are considered positively in laboratory job descriptions, employee promotion policies, and evaluation of the job performance of scientists and engineers in the laboratory.

A.1.2 The Marshall Space Flight Center has been determined to be a “Laboratory” as that term is used in the statute. Therefore a statement such as the following must be included in the position descriptions of all MSFC scientific and engineering positions: “The incumbent is responsible for complying with the provisions of the Technology Transfer act of 1986. Consistent with mission responsibilities, furthering of technology transfer is a requirement of this position. The incumbent shall identify appropriate products, processes, and/or technical advances for technology transfer to State and local governments and to the private sector.”

A.1.3 Technology transfer must also be included in the performance plans of all engineering and scientific positions at MSFC. The following element and standard are suggested for inclusion in such plans:

Element: NASA owned or originated technology is transferred to the private sector.

Standard: The supervisor is routinely satisfied that the engineer (or scientist) has identified appropriate products, processes, and/or technical advances for technology transfer to the private sector.



A.1.4 It should be recognized that not every scientist and engineer is in an equal position to uncover technology transfer opportunities, nor is every engineer and scientist able to respond to problem statements or lead application projects. This fact must be taken into consideration when assessing employee performance. If the employee did not have the opportunity to perform this element during the appraisal period the element should not be rated. "No opportunity to perform" should be noted on the appraisal form. This does not affect the employee's overall rating and should not be viewed as derogatory information. Employees should not be given a "Meets Expectations" rating on the technology transfer element if they were not involved in technology transfer activities during the rating period.

## Appendix B

### B.1. Compliance with Environmental Management Requirements

B.1.1 Executive Order 13148, Greening the Government Through Leadership in Environmental Management assigns to the head of each Federal agency, responsibility for, "...ensuring that all necessary actions are taken to integrate environmental accountability into agency day-to-day decision making and long-term planning processes, across agency missions, activities and functions" and that "...environmental management considerations must be a fundamental and integral component of Federal Government policies, operations, planning and management."

B.1.2 §404(b) of Executive Order 13148 requires that supervisors and line personnel who are directly responsible for programs or operations with environmental impact have these responsibilities integrated into the performance planning and evaluation process. §404(b) reads as follows:

"(b) To recognize and reinforce the responsibilities of facility and senior headquarters program managers, regional environmental coordinators and officers, their superiors, and to the extent practicable and appropriate, others vital to the implementation of this order, each agency shall include successful implementation of pollution prevention, community awareness, and environmental management into its position descriptions and performance evaluations for those positions."

B.1.3. The element and standard that appears below is an example of how such considerations may be integrated into the performance process. How such elements and standards should be written will vary from position to position depending upon the duties involved and the level and scope of responsibility for environmental management in the employee's position.

Element: Compliance with environmental laws, regulations, and executive orders is achieved.

Standard: The supervisor is routinely satisfied that all of the following bullets listed for the element have been met:

- Facilities and operations for which the employee is responsible comply with all applicable environmental laws and regulations and executive orders.
- Workers and the public have been informed of possible sources of pollution resulting from facility operations as required by the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986 (EPCRA).

B.2.1 Executive Order 13123, Greening the Government Through Efficient Energy Management requires that the Federal Government, "...shall significantly improve its energy management in order to save taxpayer dollars and reduce emissions that contribute to air pollution and global climate change." The Order also establishes goals for Federal agencies with regard to: (1) reduction of greenhouse gases; (2) reduction of energy consumption in its facilities; (3) expansion of the use of renewable energy sources; (4) reduction in the use of petroleum; (5) reduction in total energy use and associated greenhouse gas and other air emissions as measured at the source; and (6) reduction in water consumption and associated energy use.

B.2.2. § 406(b) of Executive Order 13123 deals with performance evaluations and reads as follows:

"(b) *Performance Evaluations.* Agencies shall include successful implementation of provisions of this order in areas such as Energy-Savings Performance Contracts, sustainable design, energy efficient procurement, energy efficiency, water conservation, and renewable energy projects in the position descriptions and performance evaluations of agency heads, members of the agency energy team, principle program managers, heads of field offices and, facility managers, energy managers, and other appropriate employees."

B.2.3. The element and standard that appears below is an example of how such considerations may be integrated into the performance process. How such elements and standards should be written will vary from position to position depending upon the duties involved and the level and scope of responsibility for environmental management in the employee's position.

Element: Compliance with energy and water conservation laws, regulations and executive orders is achieved.

Standard: The supervisor is routinely satisfied that facilities and operations for which the employee is responsible comply with all applicable laws, regulations and executive orders having to do with energy and water conservation.

B.3.1. The full text of the executive orders referenced above can be found at:

[http://archives.gov/federal\\_register/executive\\_orders/2000.html](http://archives.gov/federal_register/executive_orders/2000.html)